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Introduction: ethnography and participant observation

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Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you should

- know working definitions of our key terms: ethnography and participant observation;
- see the results from comparing and contrasting the use of the term 'ethnography' as both method and product; and
- know about participant observation as a style that may be adopted by ethnographic researchers and as context to which a variety of data collection techniques can be adapted.

A brief history of ethnographic research

Ethnography literally means a description of a people. It is important to understand that ethnography deals with people in the collective sense, not with individuals. As such, it is a way of studying people in organized, enduring groups, which may be referred to as communities or societies. The distinctive way of life that characterizes such a group is its culture. The study of culture involves an examination of the group's learned and shared behaviors, customs, and beliefs.

The ethnographic approach to the study of human groups began with anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries who were convinced that the

armchair speculations of earlier social philosophers were inadequate for understanding the way real people actually lived. They came to the conclusion that only in the field could a scholar truly encounter the dynamics of the lived human experience. Those in Britain (and other parts of the British Empire, later the Commonwealth, such as Australia and India) developed one form of ethnographic research. It reflected their fieldwork in areas then still under colonial control, societies such as those in Africa or the Pacific that seemed to be preserved in their traditional forms. In retrospect, of course, we can see that the colonial encounter drastically changed many of those societies, but a hundred years ago it was possible to look at them as being relatively untouched by the outside. The British therefore emphasized a study of the enduring institutions of society; that approach came to be called social anthropology. The two most influential social anthropologists of the British school were A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski (McGee and Warms, 2003, see especially pp. 153–215).

By contrast, anthropologists in the United States were interested in studying native American people whose traditional ways of life had by then already been drastically altered, if not completely destroyed. The US anthropologists could not assume that native people lived in the context of social institutions that represented their indigenous condition. If culture could not be found in those institutions, then it would have to be reconstructed through the historical memory of the survivors. American anthropology thus came to be referred to as cultural anthropology. The most influential American cultural anthropologist was Franz Boas, who trained a whole generation of American scholars, including Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Robert Lowie (McGee and Warms, 2003, see especially pp. 128–52).

Malinowski and Boas were both strong advocates of field-based research and both advocated what has come to be known as participant observation, a way of conducting research that places the researcher in the midst of the community he or she is studying. Because of complications arising out of international conditions during the First World War, Malinowski, who was conducting a field study of the Trobriand Islands (Western Pacific), was stranded at his field site for four years. Although it has rarely been possible to duplicate that unplanned feat, Malinowski's Trobriand ethnography has often been held up as the gold standard for the long-term total immersion of a researcher in the society under study.

The pioneers of field-based research believed that they were adhering to a method consonant with that of the natural sciences, but the fact that they were living in the very communities they were analyzing introduced a level of subjectivity into their analysis that was at variance with the scientific method as commonly understood.

Beginning in the 1920s, sociologists at the University of Chicago adapted the anthropologists' ethnographic field research methods to the study of social groups in 'modern' communities in the United States (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). The influence of this 'Chicago school' ultimately affected such fields as education, business, public health, nursing, and mass communications.

Sociocultural theory and ethnographic research

As the ethnographic method has spread across disciplines, it has become associated with a wide variety of theoretical orientations:

- structure-functionalism
- symbolic interactionism
- feminism
- Marxism
- ethnomethodology
- critical theory
- cultural studies
- postmodernism

Structure-functionalism

This was the dominant school of anthropology in Britain for much of the twentieth century, and it has long had philosophical and methodological links to sociology in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Structure-functionalism is characterized by the following basic concepts:

- The *organic analogy*, which means that society is thought of as analogous to a biological organism with structures and functions paralleling those of the physical organ systems. Each social institution, like each organ system, has a particular role to play in keeping the entire society/organism alive, but no one of them can operate optimally unless properly connected to all the others.
- A *natural science orientation*, which means that society is supposed to be studied empirically, the better to uncover its underlying patterns and overall order.
- A *narrowed conceptual field*, which means that structure-functionalists prefer to focus on society and its subsystems (e.g. the family, economy, political institutions, beliefs); they have paid comparatively little attention to art, language, personality development, technology, and the natural environment.
- A sense of *universality*, which means that all social institutions and their respective functions are assumed to be found in equivalent structures in all societies.

- The pre-eminence of *kinship studies*, which means that family ties are presumed to be the 'glue' that holds societies together; in modern societies, other institutions take on roles equivalent to the traditional family, but presumably always do so on the model of the family.
- A tendency toward *equilibrium*, which means that societies are assumed to be characterized by harmony and internal consistency; disruptions or anomalies are ultimately corrected by mechanisms existing within the society itself. This assumption leads to a tendency to see societies as somewhat *static* in their overall balance, and hence to a disinclination to study historical factors making for change in social life.

In terms of method, the structure-functionalists are strong advocates of fieldwork based on participant observation, which, in the ideal at least, is a long-term commitment, since the underlying order of a society can only be revealed by patient immersion in the lives of the people under study. A major emphasis of ethnographic fieldwork in the structure-functionalist tradition is the linkage of rules of behavior (norms) with behavior itself; disparities between what people said they ought to do and what they actually did are de-emphasized. Such an assumption works best in small, relatively homogeneous communities; hence the structure-functionalists have favored fieldwork in traditional, isolated societies or in bounded neighborhoods in modern urban areas.

Structure-functionalists approach ethnography as if it were a purely empirical exercise. People's beliefs and behaviors are considered to be real *social facts*; they are 'data' that are to be collected by objective researchers with a minimum of interpretation. Although they prefer to work with qualitative data (as opposed to numerical data generated by surveys and so forth), they uphold the scientific nature of ethnography because their data collection is in service to a view of order in social life, the pre-eminence of facts over interpretation, and by the notion that every event has a function within a coherent system.

Because kinship is seen to be the key to social organization, the structure-functionalists are particularly fond of using genealogical methods to reconstruct and illuminate all aspects of a society. They also tend to use the method of the *interview schedule*, which means that questions are asked verbally by a researcher, who fills in the answers; this approach differs from that of the questionnaire, which is distributed to respondents who then fill it out themselves. In the ideal, all interviews are done in the indigenous language, although this stipulation must sometimes be realized in the form of paid translators.

Ethnographic research in this tradition thus relies heavily on the personal interactions of researchers and their 'subjects'. While the data are believed to be objectively real, the circumstances in which those data are collected cannot be easily replicated. Hence, the structure-functionalist tradition of research emphasizes *validity* over 'reliability' (the latter being a criterion of the scientific method emphasizing replicable experiments).

Ethnography in this tradition requires lengthy immersion in particular societies. Given the logistical constraints on carrying out that mission, it is usually not possible to conduct genuinely cross-cultural research. A cross-cultural picture might emerge from the gradual accretion of particularistic studies, but the use of a standardized research design carried out by researchers simultaneously in several different locations is not a common practice. One of the perhaps unintended consequences of this tendency is an overemphasis of the perceived uniqueness of each society.

Structure-functionalist ethnography serves an *inductive* rather than a *deductive* agenda for scientific inquiry. That is, researchers begin with a particular tribe, village, community, or neighborhood that they are interested in learning about, rather than with a theory, model, or hypothesis to test. It is considered appropriate for themes or patterns to emerge from the data collected in the course of fieldwork. (See Turner, 1978, pp. 19–120, for a more complete treatment of the history, philosophy, and methods of functionalism.)

Symbolic interactionism

This orientation has been very popular in sociology and social psychology and it also has some adherents in anthropology. Unlike those social scientists who might seem to overemphasize the role of culture in ‘shaping’ human behavior, interactionists prefer to see people as active agents rather than as interchangeable parts in a large organism, passively acted upon by forces external to themselves. Society is not a set of interlocking institutions, as the structure-functionalists might have thought, but an ever-changing kaleidoscope of individuals interacting with each other. As the nature of those interactions shifts, so society is constantly changing, too. Interactionism is therefore a dynamic rather than a static approach to the study of social life.

There are several varieties of interactionism (four, seven, or eight, depending on which account one reads), but all of them share some basic assumptions:

- people live in a world of learned meanings, which are encoded as *symbols* and which are shared through interactions in a given social group;
- symbols are motivational in that they impel people to carry out their activities;
- the human mind itself grows and changes in response to the quality and extent of interactions in which the individual engages;
- the *self* is a social construct – our notion of who we are develops only in the course of interacting with others.

Ethnographic fieldwork in the interactionist tradition is geared toward uncovering the meanings social actors attach to their actions. The structure-functionalist emphasis on behavior as a set of objective facts is replaced by a more subjective delineation of how people understand what they do. Some interactionists refer to

this process as 'sympathetic introspection', while others prefer to use the German word *verstehen* in homage to the great German sociologist Max Weber, who introduced the concept into modern social science discourse. In either case, the implication is that the researcher must become immersed in the world of his or her subjects; he or she cannot be a neutral observer of their activities, but must become subjectively one with them. The key to interactionist ethnography is the uncovering of the system of symbols that gives meaning to what people think and do.

One particularly influential interactionist is the sociologist Erving Goffman, who developed what he called a *dramaturgical* approach to the study of interactions. He was concerned with how people act and form relationships, because he believed that these processes helped people achieve meaning in their lives. His research often involved descriptions of how people construct their 'presentations of self' and then perform those presentations in front of others. Goffman suggested that there is intentionality behind such performances, in that they are engaged in with an eye toward making the best possible impression (as the 'actor' understands it) in the view of significant others. They become not simply 'role makers', but active 'role players'.

Because of their interest in the nature of interactions, symbolic interactionists have devoted considerable attention to the interactions that are typical of ethnographic fieldwork itself. In a sense, they have been led to conduct an ethnographic study of the process of doing ethnography. Briefly summarizing a very large body of literature on this topic, we may say that ethnographers' interactive roles fall along a continuum with four main points: (a) the complete participant (the researcher is totally immersed in the community and does not disclose his or her research agenda); (b) the participant-as-observer (the researcher is immersed in the community but is known to be conducting research and has permission to do so); (c) the observer-as-participant (the researcher is somewhat detached from the community, interacting with it only on specific occasions, perhaps to conduct interviews or attend organized functions); and (d) the complete observer (the researcher collects completely objective data about the community from afar without becoming involved in its activities or announcing his or her presence). Each of these roles is potentially useful depending on circumstances, although tilting toward the 'participant' end of the continuum would seem to serve the goals of symbolic interactionism most effectively. (See Herman and Reynolds, 1994, for a more complete review of the theory and methods of the interactionist approach. See Gold, 1958, for the classic exposition of researcher roles alluded to in this section.)

Feminism

This approach to scholarship has in recent decades become prominent in all of the social sciences (and humanities as well, for that matter). Although linked with the sociopolitical movement for women's rights, scholarly feminism is not the

concern solely of women researchers; it represents a general approach to the study of the human social condition. Several basic principles characterize feminism in the modern social science context:

- the assumption that all social relations are *gendered*, which means that a consciousness of gender is one of the elementary factors determining a person's social status;
- the suggestion (not universally shared among feminists, it should be noted) that there is some sort of female 'essence' characterized by fundamental qualities of nurturance, caring, and a preference for cooperation over competition. This essence is expressed in different ways in different cultures, but it is recognized in some way in all societies. The reason this suggestion is not universally accepted is because there is a countervailing proposition, to wit:
- the behaviors that are considered typical of one gender or another are socially learned rather than biologically inbred; this does not make them any less important or influential in the way people act and think, but it does move the inquiry away from the biogenetic to the sociocultural perspective. Regardless of whether gender is 'essential' or socially learned, there is perceived to be
- a universal *sexual asymmetry*; even in those rare societies in which men and women are considered to be more or less equal partners, there is a recognition that men and women are different from each other, either because of innate biology or because of differential processes of *socialization* (the ways in which we learn to take on the behaviors our society tells us are appropriate).

A feminist approach has certain clear implications for the conduct of ethnographic research. For one thing, feminists tend to reject the traditional separation of a researcher and her or his 'subjects'. Such a distinction is seen to reflect the traditional categories of science which, whatever else may be said for it, has long been used as a tool of oppression. Traditional scientific research, with its emphasis on testing, operational definitions, scales, and rules, is said to have served mainly the interest of those in power, which, in most cases, did not include women. The detached researcher in control of all the elements of a research project was an authority figure par excellence, and his power was only enhanced by the enforcement of norms of objectivity and neutrality in the conduct of research. Feminists seek to de-center this relationship by a closer identification of the researcher with the community under study. Value-neutrality as a scientific ideal is rejected by feminists, because they actively and explicitly seek to promote the interests of women.

By the same token, the orderly, coherent models of social equilibrium favored by the structure-functionalists (among others) are set aside in favor of a view of social life as sometimes disorderly, incomplete, fragmented. To that end, feminist researchers look to a form of ethnography that allows for empathy, subjectivity, and dialogue, the better to explore the inner worlds of women, even to the point

of helping them articulate (and hence overcome) their oppression. The traditional 'interview' (which implicitly casts the researcher in a role of power) is also rejected in favor of a more egalitarian dialogue, often embodied in the form of the *life history* in which a person is encouraged to tell her own story in her own way and in her own terms, with minimal prompting by the researcher. Ethnography based in the life-history approach is seen as a way to 'give voice' to people historically relegated to the margins of society (and social analysis); it is also a way to preserve the wholeness of individuals, as opposed to other interviewing techniques that tend to separate them into analytical component parts. (See Morgen, 1989, for further insights into the emerging feminist perspective.)

Marxism

Marxism has had a huge impact on the study of history, economics, and political science, but its influence on those disciplines that deal with human social behavior (anthropology, sociology, social psychology) has been somewhat indirect. It is rare to find social scientists representing these disciplines who are Marxist in the fullest philosophical sense, and fewer still (especially in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union) who see Marxism per se as an ideology that might fruitfully underpin an agenda for social reform. Nonetheless, several important elements of Marxism remain very much in the thick of current discourse about society and culture.

Perhaps the most prominent Marxist-derived concept is that of *conflict*. Conflict theoreticians propose that society is defined by its interest groups, which are necessarily in competition with each other for basic resources, which may be economic, political, and/or social in nature. Unlike the functionalists, who see society as governed by some sort of core value system and who thus view conflict as an anomaly that must ultimately be overcome so that the society can re-establish equilibrium, conflict theoreticians believe that conflict is intrinsic to human interaction; indeed, it is the very thing that brings about social change. For Marx and his followers, group conflict is embedded in the institution of *social class*. Classes arise out of a fundamental division of labor within a society; they represent networks of people defined by their status position within a hierarchical structure. In the Marxist tradition, social change comes about because there is a *dialectic* process – the contradictions between and among competing social classes are resolved through conflicts of interest. Like feminism, Marxism (or, more broadly, conflict theory) focuses on issues of inequality and oppression, although the latter prefer to think in terms of socioeconomic categories like class, rather than sociocultural ones like gender as the basis of conflict.

Contemporary Marxist scholars are particularly interested in the question of *colonialism* and how that political-economic institution distorted relations between 'core' states (those that maintain a 'hegemonic' control over the production and

distribution of the world's goods and services, and that therefore have a near-monopoly on political and military power) and those on the 'periphery' (the ones that produce mainly raw materials and are thus perpetually dependent on those in control). This imbalance persists even though colonialism as an institution has disappeared in the formal sense. 'World systems theory' is one body of literature that addresses these issues of hegemony and dependency.

Modern-day students of political economy are particularly interested in what is sometimes called *material relations*, which entails a study of groups interacting with nature in the course of production, interacting with one another in relations of production that differentiate them into classes, and interacting with the 'cores', which use their coercive power to shape both production and social relations. This perspective shifts the focus away from self-contained societies, communities, neighborhoods, and so forth, and toward a consideration of the ways in which local groups are part of both regional and international flows of people, goods, services, and power. In order to understand what is going on in any one locality, it is necessary to place that society/community/culture in the context of large-scale political and economic areas in which they are influenced by other societies and cultures. The emphasis thus is *trans-cultural* rather than particularistic in nature.

Given these assumptions, it would seem that the somewhat subjective, personalized style of ethnographic research would not be a comfortable fit for conflict theoreticians or those engaged in neo-Marxist political economic research. However, it is important to note that traditional ethnographic methods may be deployed in the study of local communities, as has long been the case. The crucial difference, however, is that such ethnographic studies are designed to demonstrate not the autonomy and near-uniqueness of those communities, but their linkages to other communities that ultimately form global systems. Moreover, the neo-Marxist ethnographer would be inclined to look for evidence of class structures and the conflicts and contradictions inherent within them, even in societies that on the surface may appear to be egalitarian, non-hierarchical, and in a state seemingly approaching equilibrium. (See Wolf, 1982, for a grand exposition of the principles of neo-Marxist political economy and the ways in which traditional research about culture can be transformed to serve the purposes of this theoretical perspective.)

Ethnomethodology

This approach to the study of human behavior has been particularly influential in sociology. The aim of ethnomethodologists has been to explain how a group's sense of reality is constructed, maintained, and changed. It is based on two principal propositions:

- Human interaction is *reflexive*, which means that people interpret cues (such as words, gestures, body language, the use of space and time) in such a way as to uphold a common vision of reality; evidence that seems to contradict the common vision is either rejected or somehow rationalized into the prevailing system.
- Information is *indexed*, which means that it has meaning within a particular context; it is thus important to know the biographies of the interacting parties, their avowed purposes, and their past interactions in order to understand what is going on in a particular observed situation.

Ethnomethodological research assumes that social order is maintained by the use of techniques that allow those involved in interactions the sense that they share a common reality. Moreover, the actual content of that reality is less important than the fact that those involved accept the techniques designed to sustain the interaction. Some of the more important techniques – ones that ethnomethodologists look for when they study social settings – are:

- *The search for the 'normal form'*, which means that if the parties to the interaction begin to feel that they may not actually agree about what is going on, they will offer gestures that cue each other to return to the presumed 'norm' in their context.
- *The reliance on a 'reciprocity of perspective'*, which means that people actively communicate the belief (accepted as fact) that their experiences are interchangeable, even though they implicitly realize that they are 'coming from different places'.
- *The use of the 'et cetera principle'*, which means that in any interaction much is left unsaid, so that parties to the interaction must either fill in or wait for information needed to make sense of the other's words or actions; they implicitly agree not to interrupt to ask explicitly for clarification.

These techniques are almost always subconscious in nature and, as such, are taken for granted by members of a society. The job of the researcher is thus to uncover those covert meanings. Since it is pointless to ask people to elucidate actions they are not consciously aware of, ethnomethodologists favor observational to interview-based research. Indeed, they have refined observational methods down to the most minute 'micro exchanges', such as the analysis of conversations. Some ethnomethodologists contend that language is the fundamental base of the social order, since it is the vehicle of the communication that sustains that order in the first place.

Ethnomethodologists use the ethnographic method in order to grapple with that which is most readily observable, which is taken to be that which is most 'real'. In most cases, this reality is given substance by the attempts of interacting individuals to persuade each other that the situation in which they find themselves is

both orderly and appropriate to the social setting at hand. What is 'really real', as some analysts have put it, is the methods people use in order to construct, maintain, and sometimes subtly alter for each other a sense of order. The content of what they are saying or doing is less real than the techniques they use to convince each other that it is real. The implication is that ethnography is not used to study some large, transcendent system like 'culture' or 'society', since such abstractions can never truly order people's behavior. Rather, ethnographic research is designed to uncover how people convince each other that there really is such a thing as 'society' or 'culture' in the sense of coherent norms guiding their interaction. There is no predetermined 'sense of order' that makes society possible; rather, it is the capacity of individuals to create and use methods to persuade each other that there is a real social world to which they both belong – and to do so both actively and continually – that is the crux of the matter.

The job of ethnography, then, for the ethnomethodologists is not to answer the question, 'What is "culture"?' or 'What is "society"?' but to answer the question, 'How do people convince themselves that "culture" and "society" are viable propositions?' (See Mehan and Wood, 1975, for a clear exposition of the ethnomethodological position.)

Critical theory

This general term covers a variety of approaches to the study of contemporary society and culture. The linking theme is, as the title implies, the use of social science to challenge the assumptions of the dominant institutions of society. Feminism and Marxism, to be sure, join in this endeavor, and may be considered as variants of 'critical theory', albeit ones with their own distinctive histories and bodies of literature. In this section, however, we can consider those researchers who use ethnographic methods in order to study and influence public policy and to participate actively in political movements for social change, often playing an advocacy role that steps well beyond traditional notions of researcher neutrality.

The main philosophical approach of critical ethnographers is the development of 'multiple standpoint epistemologies', which is an explicit challenge to the traditional assumption that there was an objective, universally understood definition of what constitutes a culture. When a structure-functionalist, for example, described a particular community, his or her understanding was that this description could have been generated by any well-trained researcher and that it represented a general consensus on the part of the people in the community that this was the way things were. A multiple standpoint perspective, however, is based on the assumption that not only will there inevitably be different bodies of opinion within the community, but that different ethnographers, who bring their own baggage with them so to speak, will produce different images of what they have observed. The different bodies of opinion may not be in explicit conflict with one another, as in Marxist theory, but they certainly do not make for cultural or social

homogeneity. For the critical theorist, then, it is important to know which segment of the society is being studied by which ethnographer. A portrait that purports to be a more general view is intrinsically suspect.

Critical theorists have therefore come to favor a style of ethnographic research that is *dialogic*, *dialectical*, and *collaborative*. A dialogic ethnography is one that is not based on the traditional power relationships of interviewer and 'subject'. Rather the researcher enters into give-and-take conversations with the people of the community. The sense of a 'dialectic' perspective is that truth emerges from the confluence of divergent opinions, values, beliefs, and behaviors, not from some false homogenization imposed from the outside. Moreover, the people of the community are not 'subjects' at all; they are active collaborators in the research effort. Indeed, in certain forms of critical research (particularly that known as *participatory action research*), every effort is made to involve the community as active partners in the design and implementation of the research. In the ideal, the main task of the researcher is to train members of the community in the techniques of research so that they can do it for themselves. All of these tendencies make for a style of research that is deliberately confrontational; in both the way the research is conducted and in the findings derived from the research, there is an explicit challenge to the status quo. (See Marcus, 1999, for a selection of readings on the critical approach in anthropology and related disciplines.)

Cultural studies

Another form of critical theory that has emerged in recent years as a substantial research focus of its own is *cultural studies*, which is a field of research that examines how the lives of people are shaped by structures that have been handed down historically. Cultural studies scholars are first of all concerned with *cultural texts*, institutions such as the mass media and manifestations of popular culture that represent convergences of history, ideology, and subjective experience. The aim of ethnography with respect to cultural texts is to discern how the 'audience' relates to such texts, and to determine how hegemonic meanings are produced, distributed, and consumed.

An important feature of cultural studies is that researchers are expected to be *self-reflexive*, which means that they are as much concerned with who they are (with respect to their gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, age, and so forth) as determinants of how they see culture and society as they are with the artifacts of culture and society per se. Traditional ethnographers were, in a way, non-persons – extensions of their tape recorders, as it were. Cultural studies ethnographers, by contrast, are hyper-conscious of their own biographies, which are considered to be legitimate parts of the story.

Cultural studies is by definition an interdisciplinary field, and so its methods derive from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and history. Some have criticized this school for favoring 'theory' – producing their analyses on the basis of

abstract conceptual frameworks in preference to doing fieldwork. While this may be true in some instances, it is also true that fundamental methods of observation, interviewing, and archival research that might be used by any other social researcher are also part of the active toolkit of cultural studies scholars. However, the latter join with other critical theorists in insisting that such methods be put to the service of a sustained challenge to the social and cultural status quo. Whereas other critical scholars might prefer to use their research to advocate for specific policy outcomes, cultural studies scholars are more inclined to think in terms of a general critique of culture itself. (See Storey, 1998, for an exposition of the main concepts and approaches of cultural studies.)

Postmodernism

Several of these more recently developed approaches have also been lumped together under the label *postmodernism*. 'Modernism' was the movement in the social sciences that sought to emulate the scientific method in its objectivity and search for general patterns. 'Postmodernism', therefore, is all that challenges that *positivistic* program. Postmodernism embraces the plurality of experience, argues against the reliance on general 'laws' of human behavior, and situates all social, cultural, and historical knowledge in the contexts shaped by gender, race, and class.

Although 'postmodernism' has come to mean many things to different analysts, there are several principles that seem to hold across the vast spectrum of research so identified:

- Traditional centers of authority are explicitly challenged; this attitude is directed not only at the institutions of hegemonic dominance in society at large, but also at the pillars of the scientific establishment. Postmodernists reject the presumption of scientists to 'speak for' those whom they study.
- Human life is fundamentally *dialogical* and *polyvocal*, which means that no community can be described as a homogeneous entity in equilibrium; society is by definition a set of competing centers of interest who speak with many voices about what their culture is and is not; by extension, ethnographic research must take into account the multiple voices with which communities actually speak. 'Culture' and 'society' are concepts arrived at through a process of *social construction* rather than objective entities – although this does not make them any less 'real'.
- The ethnographic product is less an objective scientific document than a kind of literary text; it is produced as much through imaginative use of such literary devices as metaphors and symbols as it is through neutral reportage. Moreover, that ethnographic text need not be restricted to the traditional forms of the scholarly monograph, journal article, or conference presentation; rather, it may be embodied in film, drama, poetry, novels, pictorial displays, music,

and so forth. An important corollary to this proposition is the assumption that the ethnographer is an 'author' of the text – he or she figures in the story as much more than a simple, neutral reporter of objective 'data.' (See Clifford and Marcus, 1986, and Marcus and Fischer, 1986, two widely influential expositions of the postmodernist position.)

- There is a shift in emphasis away from discerning patterns of determination and causality and toward the explication of *meaning*, which requires a process of *interpretation*.
- The study of any one culture, society, or any other such phenomenon is essentially *relativistic* – the forces that shape that phenomenon are distinctively different from those that produce others, such that generalizations about social and cultural process are bound to be misleading.

Ethnography: basic principles

Despite this diversity of positions from which ethnographers may derive, we may still highlight a few important features that link the many and varied approaches:

- A search for *patterns* proceeds from the careful observations of lived behavior and from detailed interviews with people in the community under study. When ethnographers speak about 'culture' or 'society' or 'community', it is important to keep in mind that they are speaking in terms that are generalized abstractions based on numerous bits of data in ways that make sense to the ethnographer who has a global overview of the social or cultural whole that people living in it may lack.
- Ethnographers must pay careful attention to the process of field research. Attention must always be paid to the ways in which one gains entry to the field site, establishes rapport with the people living there, and comes to be a participating member of that group.

Definitions

So at this point we can say that

ethnography is the art and science of describing a human group – its institutions, interpersonal behaviors, material productions, and beliefs.

Although developed as a way of studying small-scale, non-literate, traditional societies and of reconstructing their cultural traditions, ethnography is now practiced in all sorts of social settings. In whatever setting,

ethnographic researchers are primarily concerned with the routine, everyday lives of the people they study.

Ethnographers collect data about the lived human experience in order to discern *predictable patterns* rather than to describe every conceivable instance of interaction or production.

Ethnography is conducted on-site and the ethnographer is, as much as possible, a subjective *participant* in the lives of those under study, as well as an objective *observer* of those lives.

Ethnography as method

The ethnographic method is different from other ways of conducting social science research.

- It is *field-based* (conducted in the settings in which real people actually live, rather than in laboratories where the researcher controls the elements of the behaviors to be observed or measured).
- It is *personalized* (conducted by researchers who are in day-to-day, face-to-face contact with the people they are studying and who are thus both participants in and observers of the lives under study).
- It is *multifactorial* (conducted through the use of two or more data collection techniques – which may be qualitative or quantitative in nature – in order to *triangulate* on a conclusion, which may be said to be strengthened by the multiple ways in which it was reached; see also Flick, 2007b, for a discussion of this issue).
- It requires a *long-term* commitment (i.e. it is conducted by researchers who intend to interact with the people they are studying for an extended period of time – although the exact time frame may vary anywhere from several weeks to a year or more).
- It is *inductive* (conducted in such a way as to use an accumulation of descriptive detail to build toward general patterns or explanatory theories rather than structured to test hypotheses derived from existing theories or models).
- It is *dialogic* (conducted by researchers whose conclusions and interpretations can be commented upon by those under study even as they are being formed).
- It is *holistic* (conducted so as to yield the fullest possible portrait of the group under study).

Ethnography as product

The results of some forms of ethnographic data collection may be reducible to tables, graphs, or charts, but on the whole the finished ethnographic report takes

the form of a *narrative*, a kind of extended story whose main goal is to draw the reader into a vicarious experience of the community in which the ethnographer has lived and interacted. The most common form of narrative is rendered in prose, in which case it often borrows (consciously or not) some of the literary techniques common to storytelling of any kind. (If the ethnographer makes the choice to tell the story in forms other than prose, then the resulting 'narrative' will be similarly influenced by the artistic conventions of visual art, dance, film, or whatever.)

There are many different ways in which an ethnographer can tell a story, three categories of which seem to be most common:

- Stories told in a *realistic mode* are de-personalized, objectively rendered portraits provided by an emotionally neutral analyst – even if he or she was an emotionally engaged participant during the conduct of the research itself.
- Stories told in a *confessional mode* are those in which the ethnographer becomes a central player and the story of the community under study is explicitly told through his or her particular viewpoint.
- Stories told in an *impressionistic mode* openly embrace literary – or other appropriately artistic – devices, such as the use of dialogue, elaborate character sketches, evocative descriptions of landscape or décor, flashback or flash-forward narrative structure, use of metaphors). (See van Maanen, 1988, for the classic exposition of these and other 'tales' of fieldwork.)

Regardless of the format of the narrative, any ethnographic report must somehow include several key points if it is to serve the purposes of science as well as of literature or art:

- First, there should be an *introduction* in which the reader's attention is captured and in which the researcher explains why his or her study has analytical value.
- Then there can be a *setting of the scene* in which the researcher describes the setting of the research and explains the ways in which he or she went about collecting data in that setting; many authors use the term *thick description* to indicate the way in which the scene is depicted (although the reader is urged to be cautious as this term is also used in various other ways that depart from our discussion in this section) – 'thick description' is the presentation of details, context, emotions, and the nuances of social relationships in order to evoke the 'feeling' of a scene and not just its surface attributes. (See Geertz, 1973, for the classic treatment of this issue and an elaboration of its ramifications for the conduct of ethnographic research.)
- Next comes an *analysis* in which the researcher draws the numerous descriptive details into a coherent set of social/cultural patterns that help the reader make sense of the people and their community, and that link this particular ethnographic study to those produced from other, somewhat similar communities.

- Finally, there is a *conclusion* in which the researcher summarizes the main points and suggests the contributions of this study to the wider body of knowledge.

Participant observation as style and context

It is certainly possible to use data collection techniques that are typical of ethnographic research (see Chapter 4) in ways that do not involve participant observation. For example, it may be more efficient in some cases to ask participants to write out (or tape record) their own autobiographies, rather than have those life stories collected by an on-site interviewer. But this book will be mainly concerned with those situations in which ethnographic method and product are associated with participant observation in the field setting.

In non-participant ethnography, the only thing that really matters is that prospective participants recognize the researcher as a legitimate scholar who has taken the necessary ethical precautions in structuring his or her research. Their willingness to participate is thus a kind of business arrangement. The researcher relates to them strictly *as a researcher*. But in participant observation, the people of the study community agree to the presence of the researcher among them as a neighbor and friend who also happens to be a researcher. The participant observer must thus make the effort to be acceptable as a person (which will mean different things in terms of behavior, living arrangements, and sometimes even appearance in different cultures) and not simply reputable as a scientist. He or she must thus adopt a style that is agreeable to most of the people among whom he or she proposes to live. As such, the participant observer cannot hope to control all the elements of research; he or she is dependent on the goodwill of the community (sometimes in a very literal sense, if it is a community in which the basic resources for living are scarce) and must make a tacit agreement to 'go with the flow', even if it doesn't work out according to a carefully prepared research design. As an acceptable neighbor and friend, the participant observer can go about the business of collecting data. But for our purposes in this book, remember that participant observation is not itself a 'method' of research – it is the behavioral context out of which an ethnographer uses defined techniques to collect data.

Key points

- Ethnographic research involves the holistic description of a people and their way of life.
- Ethnography was developed by anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the study of small-scale, traditional, isolated societies, although it is now widely used by practitioners of many disciplines in all kinds of research settings.

- Ethnographic research is often conducted by scholars who are both subjective participants in the community under study and objective observers thereof.
- Ethnography is a *method* of research that seeks to define predictable patterns of group behavior. It is field-based, personalized, multifactorial, long-term, inductive, dialogic, and holistic in nature.
- Ethnography is also a *product* of research. It is a narrative about the study community that evokes the lived experience of that community and that invites the reader into a vicarious encounter with the people. The narrative is typically in prose, although it may also take other literary or artistic forms in order to convey the story. In all cases, it makes use of the literary and/or artistic conventions of the appropriate genre in order to tell the story in the most compelling way.
- Participant observation is not a method in itself, but rather a personal style adopted by field-based researchers who, having been accepted by the study community, are able to use a variety of data collection techniques to find out about the people and their way of life.

Further reading

These four books will give you more information of how to plan ethnographic research:

- Agar, M. (1986) *Speaking of Ethnography*. Beverly Hills, CA: Academic Press.
- Creswell, J.W. (1997) *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fetterman, D.M. (1998) *Ethnography Step by Step* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Flick, U. (2007a) *Designing Qualitative Research* (Book 1 of *The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*). London: Sage.